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Roger Williams University School of Law

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Trending@RWU Law

Deborah Johnson's Post

Latino Heritage @ RWU Law!

Posted by Deborah Johnson on 11/25/2014 at 07:37 AM

Cada año, del 15 de septiembre al 15 de octubre, celebramos en los Estados Unidos el Mes de la Herencia Hispana, que es una oportunidad para dirigir la atención nacional a las contribuciones de la comunidad hispana a la sociedad estadounidense. (Each year, from September 15 to October 15, the nation observes Hispanic Heritage Month, celebrating the many contributions of Hispanic and Latino Americans to our nation and society.)

With the recent elections of **RWU Law Professor (and former Providence Housing Court Judge) Jorge Elorza** as Mayor of Providence and **Nellie Gorbea** as the first Latina to serve as Rhode Island's Secretary of State, the presence and prominence of Rhode Island Latinos in the legal and political arenas are increasing.

But the number of Latino/a lawyers in Rhode Island is still quite low in comparison to the overall Latino population in the state and the importance of having a bar that reflects the population of the clients its members serve cannot be understated. This issue and others were discussed when the **Latino Law Students Association** hosted a Latino Heritage event in October in celebration of **Hispanic Heritage Month**. Joining the students and speaking about the importance of having more Latino/a lawyers in Rhode Island was **Diony Garcia '12**, Special Assistant Attorney General and Treasurer of the recently created **Rhode Island Hispanic Bar Association** ("RIHBA"). Diony was actually the first student to welcome me on my first day when I joined RWU Law in February 2011!

Diony shared about his experience as a Latino male at RWU Law and the opportunities he had inside and outside the classroom -- including as a student attorney in the **Criminal Defense Clinic** and an intern in the office where he now works, and as the president of the Latino Law Students Association and the **Multicultural Law Students Association**. He also shared his recent experience of being mistaken as an interpreter in one of the courts where he practices, and why the the RIHBA was formed.

When asked why having more Latino/a lawyers in Rhode Island is important and necessary, Diony pointed to the fact that the current number of Latino/a lawyers who can represent members of the state's

Latino population is very limited, which means that many, if not most, Latino clients who would prefer to have an attorney that can understand and relate to their cultural and/or ethnic background and experience (in addition to speaking their native language) are unable to have such representation. Moreover, he said, their number is so small that there are still attorneys and judges who are unaccustomed to seeing a Latino lawyer in certain courts or knowing a Latino/a lawyer who works in certain practice areas.

Diony explained that the RIHBA was formed, in part, to address the specific needs of Rhode Island's Latino community (for example, combatting the proliferation of "*notarios*" who falsely hold themselves out as legal representatives) and to engage more Latinos in the practice of law in the state. Part of the latter includes building upon the great work that RWU Law has done in attracting an increasing number of Latino/a law students to Rhode Island and encouraging those students to remain here to practice after graduation.

Diony also gave the students general advice on how to succeed at RWU Law and things to think about as they pursue their legal careers, and a dose of laughter as he shared funny stories about his time at RWU Law and during his relatively short time as a practicing attorney. He encouraged students to pursue what they are interested in and shared the fact that he always wanted to be a prosecutor despite the frequent comments he got (and still sometimes gets) from other Latinos and people of color about "being on the wrong side." Despite the comments, he stayed the course and is now a state prosecutor, which he takes pride in because it is important to him to prosecute the individuals who commit crimes in his neighborhood and harm his community, a perspective that is not often considered.

The Latino Heritage event was pleasantly low-key, filled with good discussion, important insights and delicious Latin food and drink to celebrate the broad and diverse Latino culture in our nation and in our law school.